

Time to rescue our national flag from extremists

THIS week's St. Patrick's celebrations give us a chance to reflect on our national identity and I believe it is time to reclaim the Irish flag. Our flag symbolises who we are and where we came from. It belongs to all citizens, each and every one of us.

Historically, it was raised above the GPO during the 1916 Easter Rising and for generations has come to signify reclaiming our independence as a nation.

The Tricolour belongs to no one political party, although it has been widely used, and sometimes misused, by Sinn Féin and other political organisations.

I believe this portrays the flag in a different light to what was originally intended for the symbolism of the Tricolour.

It was supposed to be a symbol of peace. Symbolically, the white represents the peaceful co-existence of the two traditions, the orange tradition of the Protestant

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people and the green tradition of the nationalist people.

And indeed it is this peaceful co-existence that it has come to represent right across the world, in war-torn countries where Irish peacekeepers wear it proudly on their uniforms.

In the Congo, the Lebanon, the Golan Heights and other destinations where it is worn proudly by our soldiers on their missions of peace.

Here in Ireland, however, the Irish Tricolour, our national flag, is now often associated with protest, violence and intimidation, which

was never the intention.

The flag has also been defaced and abused by some, and this is a sad reflection on those people who don't appreciate or respect our history.

The Irish flag is and should continue to be the symbol of many positive events in our recent history. It adorns all of our State buildings as a mark of our pride in our sovereign independence as a nation.

When this Government came into power, that very same sovereignty was in a fragile state - major decisions regarding the Irish people were being taken out of our hands and instead were being made by representatives of the Troika and the IMF.

Through hard work and sacrifice, the Irish people have restored our pride and we are now in charge of our own sovereign state once again. That is some achievement in four short years.

I met a man recently who told me that the proudest moment of his life was when his son won a

medal in the Special Olympics and the Irish flag was raised above the podium. This is what the flag should celebrate, pride in our achievements.

When the Pope came to Ireland in 1979, thousands of people congregated in the Phoenix Park waving the Tricolour. At that time,



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the flag adorned homes along my own street, as a symbol of welcome and national pride. It was the same when Jack Charlton brought the Irish soccer team back from Italia '90 and remains today a symbol of our sporting success around the world, through GAA, boxing, cricket, rugby, athletics, the list goes on.

St. Patrick's Day is the day of the year when our flag is most visible throughout the world, celebrating our Irish identity on our National Feast Day of St. Patrick.

We see buildings around the world adorned with the Tricolour, side by side with their own country's national flag. There aren't many other nations which can say that and it helps our diaspora to feel a connection to home.

One of my lasting memories of visiting the USA was walking down a residential street and seeing the Stars and Stripes proudly hanging on the front porch of almost every home. Sadly, we cannot do the same here without being associated with a particular political party or protest cause.

But to me, our flag is more than a symbol of a political identity. It's a symbol of our independence and, above all, peace - and we must all pay it the respect it deserves.

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